

Testimony in Support of S.B. 991, An Act Concerning Medicaid Reimbursement for Community Health Workers

Human Services Committee  
Monya Saunders  
February 21, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Lesser, Representative Gilchrest, and all members of the Human Services Committee,

My name is Monya Saunders and I live in New Haven, Connecticut. I am here to testify in support of S.B. 991, An Act Concerning Medicaid Reimbursement for Community Health Workers. I'm testifying on behalf of Transitions Clinic Network, which provides primary care to Connecticut residents returning home from incarceration from our clinics in Bridgeport, New Haven, and East Hartford.

I am a proud community health worker. I support men and women as they transition from incarceration back into our community, and I connect them to health care. My work saves lives.

I go into prisons and speak to women who are about to come home and I introduce myself to them. I share my own personal story of being incarcerated. I let them know what they can expect, and what things are in place for them on the outside. I want my name in their heads, I want to provide them a warm introduction to the health care system on the outside, a system they may not be familiar with, a system they may not understand, also a system they may not trust.

I also speak to the correctional officers as a formerly-incarcerated woman to let them know that when people reach their station, these people are at their lowest. I remind them that these are human beings, I want to plant the seed with the officers that they should talk to people as human beings, not as animals as a cage. I tell them that they see people at their lowest low.

I recently learned that the DOC staff are putting my name on people's discharge plans – they are leaving with a piece of paper that says "Talk to Monya Saunders." That's the power of my work, that's the power of those of us who have our own history with the system: we have credibility.

I set primary care appointments up with the discharge planner for the men and women coming home. I connect them with job referrals. I connect them with a lot of support. They need to be supported. We need to give people some encouragement and some hope. I meet people before they come to our Transitions clinic. I try to get as much information as possible for the clinic. I figure out what the person's struggle is before they come to our clinic. Sometimes I need to help people just get to the clinic – some people don't want to see a doctor, and some don't have transportation. One patient told me, "Monya, I don't have a place to live, how am I going to be worried about seeing a doctor?"

But I tell people I'm a peer, I'm not above them. Transitions has created a plan just for people like us, people who have been incarcerated. At Transitions, you're not going to face stigma,

you're not going to be judged, we just want to make sure you get good health care. These are caring doctors. That makes the difference as well, you don't have to be looked down on. We are welcoming people. Your past doesn't matter when you see us.

But this is where you come in. There are two of us in the whole state. That's not even enough for New Haven people are coming home every week. You go in, you're going to come home. There's a lot of needs. Men and women. People are falling through the cracks.

We need funding for community health workers, and we to ensure that the work of formerly-incarcerated community health workers is funded as well, whether we are doing our work in the prison or in the community. We need community health workers meeting the needs of all of the communities in Connecticut, not just a few. Our Medical-Legal Partnership Student Elena and Director James Bhandary-Alexander also submitted testimony to talk about this policy, and why you should fund formerly-incarcerated community health workers.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Monya Saunders  
Transitions Clinic Network